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## Hypothermia

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## HYPOTHERMIA

The *hog and jog*. The *bolt and jolt*. There's nothing like it. You can try all you want, but there is nothing that tightens the nerves in your abdomen like skipping out on the bill and watching the busboys and dishdogs fill your peripheral vision as you burst through the double glass doors.

This is our goodbye dinner for Alex. He orders a double cheeseburger because he's beefing up for basic training. He's about to leave for the first Gulf War. When Alex got word that Saddam was the new Hitler, he'd ridden his bike down to the recruiter adjacent to the Skyline Chili before you could say hydrogen cyanide. Jessica, Alex's girlfriend, orders a Caesar's salad because she's on a perpetual diet. Vanessa, my date, orders buffalo wings, two eggs, a waffle, fruit yogurt and a hamburger with fries, because she's bulimic. She gets the hamburger instead of a cheeseburger because she's Jewish, and she can't mix cow meat with cow milk. I note the yogurt on her order, and she says that she's not that Jewish. Just Jewish. I order pancakes and a double order of bacon because I enjoy eating breakfast food for dinner.

When Alex joined the service, we assumed it was hi-jinx, a lark, but then he had his physical, and then he signed his papers. If he fails to show up in the morning, he will be considered AWOL. I know part of Jessica's plan is that we'll get busted, and he won't have to go to the Army, and since I'm a little bit in love with Jessica, my plan is that he be there at eight o'clock on the button.

The waitress asks if we want anything to drink. Do they serve beer? They do not. Alex and I get a pot of coffee, Vanessa gets a Coke, and Jessica orders a Tab. Our waitress is a tall, ostrich-legged red-head. You can tell that Big Red experienced about a nano-second flash of beauty in her twenties, a flash that she squandered swilling plastic bottle vodka in a Clearwater Beach singles bar, now cursed to serve smart-assed teenagers at three a.m. for the next thirty

years. But the woman must have some kind of Jedi voodoo, because she knows we're going to skip out on the bill. It's my fault, I know. At this point, I stare at her eyeball to eyeball, trying to convey telepathic messages that all is cool, all is kosher. I try to convey the message that there are a whole slew of universes going on simultaneously. I've been on a serious multi-verse obsession, and I have been trying to tell her that there is one universe where we pay, one where we're the waiters, and one where we bolt. This happens to be the one where we bolt. Therefore, all is cool. All is dandy. All is kosher. We are going to eat, continue eating, find our seam, cruise through the double glass doors and disappear into the darkness. So no need to fret, I tell her with my eyes. I try to assure the waitress that in a very near dimension, we are doubling the tip.

However, all is not kosher. When we started the evening at Alex's for a couple cans of beer, we were hitting his fluorescent blue PVC ice bong, chugging down some kind of wicked, throat scalding skunk weed. We were also watching CNN and the little Kuwaiti princess bleat about the Iraqi soldiers and the incubator babies. The four of us watched in amazement as the girl described the atrocities of Saddam's army. Then, Jessica cut the cannabis haze like a laser-guided tomahawk missile when she said that the whole thing was a load of crap. She declared that the girl was a tasty little cunt, and you couldn't write a better load of dog shit in Hollywood. I said, "Well," but all of my instincts told me to agree with Jessica. I could tell her comments rubbed Alex the wrong way. She was his girlfriend, and he was less than twenty-four hours from joining the fight. After we poured the bongwater into four evenly divided cups and shot it down, Alex said, pointing to the television, "That's why I signed up. Some jerk-off dictator out there orders his men to burn everything, rape all the women, slaughter the babies, and then his men go out and follow his orders. You know what that tells me?" We waited for an answer, even though we knew the answer.

The news on TV had told us already, so we knew what was coming. "It tells me that they're not human. They're inhuman."

This is my second date with Vanessa, and nothing like a hog and jog to ward off the sophomore jinx. She and I work together at the Salad Station five miles up U.S. 19 – one of those all-you-can-eat places that hypnotize neo-hippie health freaks. I can tell that Jessica neither likes nor approves of Vanessa, which I chalk up to natural female seed-competition. Jessica did not approve of Vanessa from the beginning, though Vanessa barely passed my test as well. But her reputation suggested that my chances were good, and sitting on my shoulders spoke both an angel and public health official, each of them pleading their cases.

On the drive out to Denny's, the conversation about the bleating Kuwaiti girl took a lull, but after Big Red serves our meals, Jessica can't help herself and says, "Babies don't just shrivel up and die when you take them out of incubators. They would eventually die of starvation, or their blood sugar levels would drop, and they would go into shock. They don't just die if you take them out of incubators."

"They would die of hyperthermia," Alex said.

I correct Alex and tell him that if the babies died of hyperthermia, it would mean that once taken out of the incubators, they would overheat to the point of baking. Their blood would boil, and they would die.

"Hypothermia," Jessica says.

"Whatever," Alex says. "They would die. They would die of hypothermia."

"Eventually," Jessica says, "but the girl said that the Iraqi soldiers took them out and watched them die on the cold floor."

"The cold floor," Alex says.



"But babies don't just die that easily," Jessica says. "Babies are resilient."

"She was talking about preemies," Alex says. "Preemies."

"Babies have even survived abortions," Jessica says.

I give Jessica a quick look and give her the kill sign, slashing my hand across my throat, nodding my head towards Vanessa.

"I'm just saying that the babies would not die that fast. It takes a while for babies to die. And if these Iraqi soldiers are so savage, they would have just skewered the babies," Jessica says.

"She's right," I say.

"I am right," Jessica says, as Big Red comes along with our coffees and sodas. She asks us if we need anything else, and Alex orders a side order of fries and maybe a Reuben, Vanessa gets another waffle and fries, Jessica breaks down and gets a burger, and I get one, too. Then we ask for chocolate shakes all around. Big Red gives us another evil eye, and I reciprocate with my telepathy.

"If these Iraqi soldiers are in the process of invading a country," I say, "and they are as vicious as this Kuwaiti princess claims, would they really waste their time waiting for the slow process of babies succumbing to exposure, what with all of the raping and pillaging to do?" I tell the table that just as a bystander, if I was a savage Iraqi soldier, I'd make time with that Kuwaiti princess.

"She's fifteen," Alex says.

"You're disgusting," Jessica says. "I know what you're trying to say," she dips one of Alex's fries in ketchup, "but you're still kind of disgusting."

"You people are blind," Alex says. "It's sad. That's the problem. It's sad."

"It just smells too weird," Jessica says, continuing to eat Alex's fries. Then Vanessa takes one of his fries, too, dipping it in a monkey dish of mayo, bites only the part of the fry coated in sauce, then dips again and again.

As the second date, it is also the second occasion in over two years that I have not served as the third wheel. Usually, Alex, Jessica and I do everything together. We play miniature golf together. We pack back-packs full of Milwaukee's Best and ride our bikes to Dunedin Causeway and swim across shark infested inlets to Caledesi Island, or we go way out on Clearwater Beach or Honeymoon Island where there is nobody. We slug beers, then Alex and Jessica crawl off beyond the dunes and sawgrass to hump, while I smoke cigarettes and take a swim out to the dark waters and try to attract hammerheads.

I know why Alex and Jessica keep me around. As Alex's best friend, I'm also their court jester. My skills as permanently lonesome are crafted to keep those around me entertained. I've been able to buy beer since I was seventeen (also Jedi voodoo), juggle fire, funnel beer standing on my head, and lately, there is my obsession with parallel and multiple universes. I'm also the opposite of Alex. Alex's parents pay his rent, buy his car, give him money, a stereo system – everything. And he gets Jessica. I'm Johnny Two-Dollars, even with a job – all of my cash going to repair my '66 Falcon, or tuition for the fall semester at the junior college, or gas, or anything. It's even odd for me to be out with a woman. Where Alex and Jessica touch arms and hands and legs with ease, naturally eat from each others' plates, I can feel each negative ion pulsating between Vanessa and myself. Jessica told me I would be fine, just hang out – be cool – don't be weird. Each time I start to talk about the multi-verse, she holds up her hand and backs me down.

"Just nuke'em," Vanessa says. "Just drop a bomb on those assholes and be done with the whole fucking war in a day."

"We're not going to start a nuclear war," Alex says. "We may drop a neutron bomb if we absolutely have to, but those bombs are barely bigger than some of the major conventional weap-

ons – and we wouldn't drop them on residential areas, like Saddam does. Trust me on that one. We're going to dismantle the place piece by piece and shove their SCUDs up enough asses until they get the hell out of Kuwait. Kuwait's freedom is our freedom. That's what I'm fighting for."

"That little Kuwaiti princess is a muppet," Jessica says. "Anybody can see that."

"We're all muppets, if you think about it," I say, though I'm not sure exactly what I mean.

"You're a traitor, baby," Alex says to Jessica. "I love you, honey, but they should put you to death." Alex takes a bite of his sandwich that is clearly overestimated, and it is quickly apparent that he isn't finished talking, but he may or may not be able to work the food down his throat, and for a moment, the three of us watch in anticipation. When he accomplishes this peristaltic feat and washes it down with a slug of coffee, he hammers his chest with the side of his fist and says to Jessica, "So you're calling that little girl a liar. That little Kuwaiti girl."

I raise my cup of coffee and say, "Well. Here's to Alex giving his life, so we can all be muppets."

"And here's to fighting for our freedom, so you pussies can hog and jog," Alex says.

"And here's to making sweet love to Jessica for the next two years," which very nearly turns out to be true. In the fall, when college starts, Jessica and I move in together in a little shithole off Douglas, in Dunedin, where we share one queen bed between us, no couch, one set of dishes and a single radio for entertainment. For one semester, we live like a team and harmonize. It's her job to wash the dishes and my job to kill the cockroaches living behind the walls and inside the dishwasher. We both attend junior college. She waits tables, and I get a job dogging dishes at Jessie's Dockside, working with ex-cons and assholes and heavy metal tattoo fiends



— and those are the cooks and runners. I'm on the bottom rung sweating it out in the dishpit. Jessica and I both correspond with Alex. She writes him her letters, and I research his war for him, sending him documentation of Kuwait's lateral drilling into Iraq oil fields, a little thank you gift for protecting them against the wrath of Iran. I tell him that Kuwait is nice enough to hire Iraqi girls as prostitutes, so their sheiks can do their own drilling. I send him information about Great Britain's whimsical process of demarcation, transcripts of interviews from Vietnam Vets, prepping him for the star treatment when he returns home with his shellshock and mysterious illnesses. He writes me letters of camaraderie, the spirit of freedom on the front lines, how you can feel it in the air, how you know freedom is worth fighting for because you can taste it. He writes how he happily pulls hundred and seven-hour shifts in a tank, sweating out the hours with dirty jokes and amphetamines. He writes me about what it was like to be part of history, to be part of a book, part of something real that everyone will remember for centuries, and when the war starts, he writes about how they had cruised along the trenches in behemoth vehicles just pouring the sand back in the trenches, doing away with whole regiments of Saddam's forces. They bury the sweaty fuckers alive without wasting any of their precious depleted uranium-tipped bullets. He writes of the fate of the ragheads who had tried to flee, only to taste the fury of M-16s, spinning and ripping through their flesh. Alex writes that their artillery does not gun people down, but literally rips people in half, and when people are ripped in half, it is not clean, like a blade, or a halved rump roast, but bodies burst and bubble, and it doesn't even look like meat. Alex writes about the adrenaline, the rush, the victory and a smell so odd and intense that it works its way in like nothing the sand can do. The smell gets in your nasal cavity and stays there, and even when you're back at camp, beating off in a lukewarm shower of non-potable water,



you still can't get the smell out of your head.

"The good news," I tell the table – Jessica holds up her hand, but I can only hold out so long. I drain my chocolate shake and say, "According to multi-verse theory, there is an alternate universe where we don't even go to war, and Alex is free from proving his machismo. Of course, there is also a universe where Alex stays here and goes to junior college, and I get the hard-on for killing raggheads. Seriously," I say. "People thought Isaac Newton was a loon when he ran around talking about gravity. In time, in the future, the multi-verse will seem like common sense."

"Why do you talk about these things?" Jessica says. "I love you to pieces, and then you start talking about retarded things."

"This is legitimate quantum theory," I say.

"It's legitimate *dork* theory," Alex says.

Jessica says that you can't have a universe for every decision you make, that you can't just have a billion universes. She speaks with a milkshake mustache that makes her look both old and young at the same time. It also gives her a look that makes my stomach go cold. When Jessica was young, a robber had broken into her house and bashed her in the head with a fire extinguisher, shattering the top of her orbital bone. As a result, her left eye droops a little, a couple millimeters shy of grotesque, but instead gives her face that extra impressionistic flair that makes me crazy about her. I ask her why you can't have a billion universes.

"Because you can't."

"Why not?" Vanessa says. "If he believes it, it's true."

"That's not true either," I tell Vanessa. "Things don't become true just because you believe them."

"Yes, they do," she says.

"This is why," I tell them, drawing a diagram of a tiny dot, surrounded by two more dots, and explain to them that this is an

atom. The vast majority is space, and these particles of matter actually breathe, they expand and contract. You don't have to stack one universe on top of the other, but you can layer them. You can live side by side these other worlds, and they can even be closer than that. They can be intertwined.

"Again," Vanessa says, "just nuke'em."

Jessica tells Vanessa that we've changed subjects.

Vanessa says that when you die, you're worm food. "You people are driving me batshit. We need to get the hell out of here." She announces that she is going to the bathroom, and I'm surprised that it takes her this long. Every minute that passes, her body is absorbing molecule after molecule of nutrition, and it must be killing her. I want to tell Vanessa to wait, because I know what Jessica is going to say next, I can pull the words from her mouth like a sleeve full of scarves, and I do. Jessica says she is leaving. She gets up and walks out the door, and I know that I'm in one of those moments where you can reel time back and forth at will, where you can see the motivations and faultlines, actions and reactions. I can feel parts of me waking and slumbering and I know that I can't go back to the Salad Station after ditching Vanessa, even though she walks out two minutes after us to the parking lot, untouched and unwatched.

For Alex and me, the Dobermans are let loose. In the corner of my vision, I see Alex square up against a busboy – the asshole is completely ignorant of the fact that Alex is already fighting for his country – he gets arrested, and Uncle Sam is already one man down. The busboy has Alex by the collar of his shirt with his outstretched arm – not a bad move had he been gripping me, but Alex pulls him close by arching back then releases a flurry of fists, and that's all I need to see before cutting between the cars and bolting across the highway. I use a rare skill of being able to time speeding vehicles weaving in opposite directions, a skill

the busboys lack, and they know it. Once across the six lanes, I stand safely with a raised middle finger. That's when I see Vanessa through the windows across the street, safely erasing any additional guilt by walking out of the double glass doors.

All of this is easy to see at the moment, in the present, sitting there, still at the restaurant, picking over the remains of our feast, and I know that I'll forgo the night's sleep before shipping Alex off to the war, and that he will be writing me letters about the desert, and that he'll write to me that his regiment had returned to the site of the war's beginning the following day to make certain that everyone had either been buried or slaughtered, and he had not expected to see what he had seen. I could practically read the letters sitting there in Denny's, his description of arms and legs sticking out of the sand – the scene had looked like some kind of horrific student art exhibition out in the middle of the desert – some of his fellow soldiers even stealing boots, and personal items, bullets and weapons, and in some cases teeth, and in every case gold teeth, but I did not expect to read his confessions or the fact that he remembered our conversation about the multi-verse, and that he had proof that I was wrong. He writes that it isn't a matter of a separate world where the enemy could have been him, but it was like returning to a site where you have physically removed your soul, then you hold your soul by the back of its invisible hair, then drag a knife across its neck from ear to ear, then bury it headfirst in the hundred forty-five degree sand. He writes that it was the first time he had ever felt light and heavy at the same time. I can read his letters from the Highway of Death here, too, sitting in Denny's, pushing our luck with a coconut crème pie, how he had not been there the day the jet planes strafed the strip of land from Kuwait to Baghdad, when the hundred thousand terrified Iraqi soldiers raced across the desert until they were reduced to teeth and carbon, but he shows up the next morning, with the task of walking through



the mess of twisted metal and tanks, dismembered bodies, frozen in horror, shooting anything that moved.

"Everybody knows it," he writes. "Everybody here knows it, but most people won't talk about it," and I know what he's talking about. He is referring to something I wrote to him in the beginning, that when you kill, you kill. You end the energy of a single life force, and whether you like it or know it, whether it is murder or not, justifiable or not, your own life force is affected, and your cells even know it, and your cells will remember that you have snuffed this force, and the killing will resonate for the rest of your life. Even Shakespeare knew it, which is why he did not allow his murderous characters to sleep.

One night after work, Jessica and I split a six-pack of Milwaukee's Best and a pack of Seven Eleven ephedrine. We rode our bikes across Dunedin Causeway down to Honeymoon Island. By the time we reached the beach, the ephedrine had turned our hair follicles into ecstatic electrodes, lighting up like static glow when the wind blew, and the water even seemed to be in on the fun, as phosphorescence splashed along with us as we swam out to Caledesi across the shark waters in mysterious dayglo green. It was one of those warm Florida winter evenings, when the water runs cold and nothing is feeding on the food chain. The sharks are down there, but they are letting us have our time. We held on to each other at times, our legs kicking, our knees and ankles knocking together, sometimes locking together in simulated bliss. We returned home, back to the rat trap on Douglas, both of us itching something fierce from sand and saltwater residue. We soothed our stings with the burn of Seabreeze, and that's when they made the announcement on the radio about the beginning of Desert Storm. That night we slept under a single sheet on the same bed, and in the morning, she was on the telephone.

By May, the correspondence between Alex and I had ended. Once, later in the summer, I saw Alex's mother at Publix. We were both buying Cheerios. And then one afternoon near the end of summer, I saw Alex hitching up U.S. 19. He was all the way up in Tarpon Springs, near Klosterman on the opposite side of the highway. As I passed, I could see that his teeth had gotten longer as he shielded the sun from his eyes with his hands and looked for possible rides. He was wearing a plain white T-shirt and blue jeans. I could tell it was him in a second, and my heart juggled around in my chest for a couple hard strong palpitations, and I jerked a U-turn halfway to Alderman. It was a hot, Florida August. My car would provide no relief, as my '66 Falcon with the windows down was nothing but a moving convection oven with the A.C. a solid decade in decay. I wondered what Alex was doing this far north of Dunedin. Jessica had moved back with her parents, and Alex's parents were in Clearwater, but I imagined that there were probably a hundred reasons why he could be there or anywhere. I tried to catch up to him, but I was on the inside lane, and a Cadillac full of geriatrics blocked my attempts to change lanes and reach him. I tried to pass them, but they edged closer up on me. Then for some reason, I slowed down and got even with them. When they looked at me, I made a gun sign with my hand and pretended the shoot them all, one by one. The action seemed absurd, and foolish, and perhaps dangerous, but it had also taken me out of the moment. By the time I gotten into the far right lane, I had passed Klosterman Road again, and looking back in the rear-view mirror, I could see Alex still there on the side of the road, shielding the sun from his eyes, scouting down a lift.